

If It Bleeds, Does It Still Lead? Local Television Evening News in Hampton Roads



IF IT BLEEDS, DOES IT STILL LEAD? LOCAL TELEVISION EVENING NEWS IN HAMPTON ROADS

In 2008, the State of the Region report examined the evening news coverage of television stations located in Hampton Roads. That study focused on the stories run by the four major television network stations in the region from Sept. 10-27, 2007. The results were provocative because they reported that evening news coverage was heavily weighted with stories about crime, especially violent crime. This finding sparked debate among media critics and practitioners alike. We thought it worthwhile to revisit both the programming and the statistical results to see if anything had changed over the 3½ years since the initial study.

For the 2008 report, we asked local television news directors to comment on our findings, but none expressed interest. That chapter, titled “If It Bleeds, Does It Lead?”, demonstrated that all of the major local evening newscasts were heavily weighted with stories dealing with crime, and this was especially true for lead stories. Further, African Americans were prominently featured in these stories. Several of the news directors of the major television stations in Hampton Roads expressed their displeasure with the content of the 2008 State of the Region chapter concerning them, even though they had declined to talk with us about our findings.

The same general disinterest holds true in 2011. Why? This is not clear. It could be the case that the ratings numbers connected to the coverage of crime are sufficiently strong that the stations feel they know what the public really prefers and hence can ignore any momentary adverse publicity that attaches to their coverage. While the content of the State of the Region report often stimulates news coverage by regional television stations, if past experience holds, then it is unlikely that the findings of this particular chapter will receive much, if any, television coverage.

Our Focus

Some people believe that local broadcast news provides an overwhelming negative and even misleading view of urban life. Striking images of crime and violence regularly appear on local television evening newscasts. Vivid images

of shootings, beatings and assaults – all are potentially part of the local evening news. However, is this widely held assessment accurate? Do crime stories actually dominate the news on the local television evening news programs here in Hampton Roads?

Context

The 2011 issue of *Journal of Communication* delved into issues of framing and agenda setting in the news media. During the past 20 years, nearly all scholarly inquiries have found that major news media coverage in cities reinforces an overwhelmingly negative and misleading view of urban America because it showcases an unrelenting series of stories that augments social pathologies such as gangs, drug problems, mounting crime, racial tensions, and inadequate social and educational services. Minimal news coverage has been given to community organizations that address and even resolve problems.

The adage regarding television news, “If it bleeds, it leads,” usually still runs true to form. Television stations believe that audiences are drawn to the drama of crime news on television in the same way they are drawn to the scene of an accident. The late famed news broadcaster David Brinkley once noted, “One function TV news performs very well is that when there is no news we give it to you with the same emphasis as if there were.”

Researchers found that local news exposure has an agenda-setting effect by inspiring what people talk about and helping determine the things to which they

attach importance. One fascinating and quite relevant example illustrates the more positive aspect of this tendency. WAVY-TV investigative reporter Andy Fox, the 2011 recipient of the Edward R. Murrow Broadcasting Award, exposed how certain restaurants bought possibly tainted meat. He followed distributors using unrefrigerated trucks for more than three hours in sweltering summer heat in order to make his case. His coverage caused this issue to become a leading topic of concern and outrage.

Americans tend to rely on news media sources for their understanding of social events, of which crime is a particularly salient concern. In his "Columbia History of American Television" (2007), Old Dominion University Professor Gary Edgerton demonstrated how television histories have shaped our collective memory in the media age, sculpting our national consciousness. American audiences form general impressions about issues in incremental ways, integrating news bites and images into an overarching belief system. These beliefs then influence social interactions, views of one's community and voting habits.

The key communication concept explaining this phenomenon is known as framing, the process whereby news producers and directors select what news to investigate and broadcast, and in what ways. They not only choose which stories to cover, but also select which reporters to assign, how much airtime to give them and how to prioritize the stories that result. Complicated and quick decisions must be handled with efficiency, dexterity and sensitivity to the pressing needs and values of the community they serve. Framing helps television news audiences recognize the newsworthiness of a story and influences their own understanding of the world. It establishes the importance and personal significance of the reported news.

Framing necessarily prioritizes certain stories over others, and even if it doesn't lead to predetermined conclusions, it sets the story as a prioritized topic of discussion. It also sets the agenda, highlighting particular issues and particular aspects of those issues. For example, one study by researchers Kimberly Gross and Sean Aday tested agenda setting using local broadcast news and neighborhood crime rates to discover how television created "The Scary World in Your Living Room and Neighborhood" (the title of their study, published in vol. 53, issue 3 of *Journal of Communication*). Essentially, they found that the watching of local television news has a powerful effect on the perceptions of viewers about what is important, and what is not. Humorist Dave Barry was not

far off target when he confessed, "I would not know how I am supposed to feel about many stories if not for the fact that the TV news personalities make sad faces for sad stories and happy faces for happy stories."

The challenge of framing crime stories raises its own set of assumptions and concerns. Television news, by its own limited nature, simplifies complex issues of crime and antisocial behavior. For example, reporters too often tend to explain the causes of crime in terms of poverty or dysfunctional social networks, whether or not those actually apply. Even though the vast majority of lower-income people do not engage in criminal behavior, the impression that they do because of poverty lingers through select news coverage. Such coverage tends to reinforce stereotypes. To paraphrase the late humorist and newspaper columnist Art Buchwald, the problem with television news is that it has no page two, so that every lead story "gets the same play and comes across to the viewer as a really, big scary one."

Our Methodology

We examined four weeks of local television evening news in order to report the content that makes up the news presented by the four major network-affiliated stations: WTKR (CBS), WAVY (NBC), WVEC (ABC) and WVBT (Fox). We recorded and examined weekday programming from Jan. 3-31, 2011 – 21 days in all. This time period was chosen in order to avoid major political events that could skew the results. For the local ABC, NBC and CBS stations, we recorded the early evening news program. For the Fox affiliate, which does not broadcast an early evening news program, we recorded the news from the late evening broadcast. Trained coders analyzed all of the programs to assess the news content. Each news story was a unit of analysis and the total number of news stories analyzed was 1,132.

What We Found

Question No. 1: What is the percentage of crime stories on the local television evening news programs in Hampton Roads?

With regard to what was the “subject” of the story, we found that the category general crime, which is nonviolent crime that could not be considered as white-collar crime, was found to be the subject most often identified. For example, much theft falls into this category. General crime was the subject of 149 stories (13.2 percent). Tied for the subject of the second most identified news story were violent crime and sports, each with 125 (11 percent) of the stories analyzed. Some of the other top news story categories were: military (8.3 percent), accidents (6.5 percent), politics/government (5.7 percent) and arts/entertainment (5 percent). It is not surprising that military stories made up a significant proportion of local news, as this area has a significant military population.

Table 1 provides a visual description of the raw number of crime stories reported on the early evening and evening news (291 total crime stories out of 1,132 stories analyzed, which is 25.7 percent of all news stories).

When we examined types of violent crimes reported in the local television news broadcasts (see Table 1) we found that 125 of the stories (11 percent) were about violent news events. White-collar crime accounted for only 1.5 percent of the news coverage (17 stories).

As indicated by Table 1, violent crime represented nearly 43 percent of all crime stories (125 out of 291 stories). General crime stories primarily involved petty larceny, grand larceny and other crimes devoid of serious injury. All sexual assaults were coded as violent crimes.

TABLE 1 PERCENTAGE OF CRIME NEWS STORIES IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS			
Subject of News Story	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Violent Crime	125 stories	11.0 %	11.0 %
White-Collar Crime	17 stories	1.5 %	12.5 %
General Crime	149 stories	13.2 %	25.7 %
Total Crime Coverage	291 stories	25.7 % of the news	

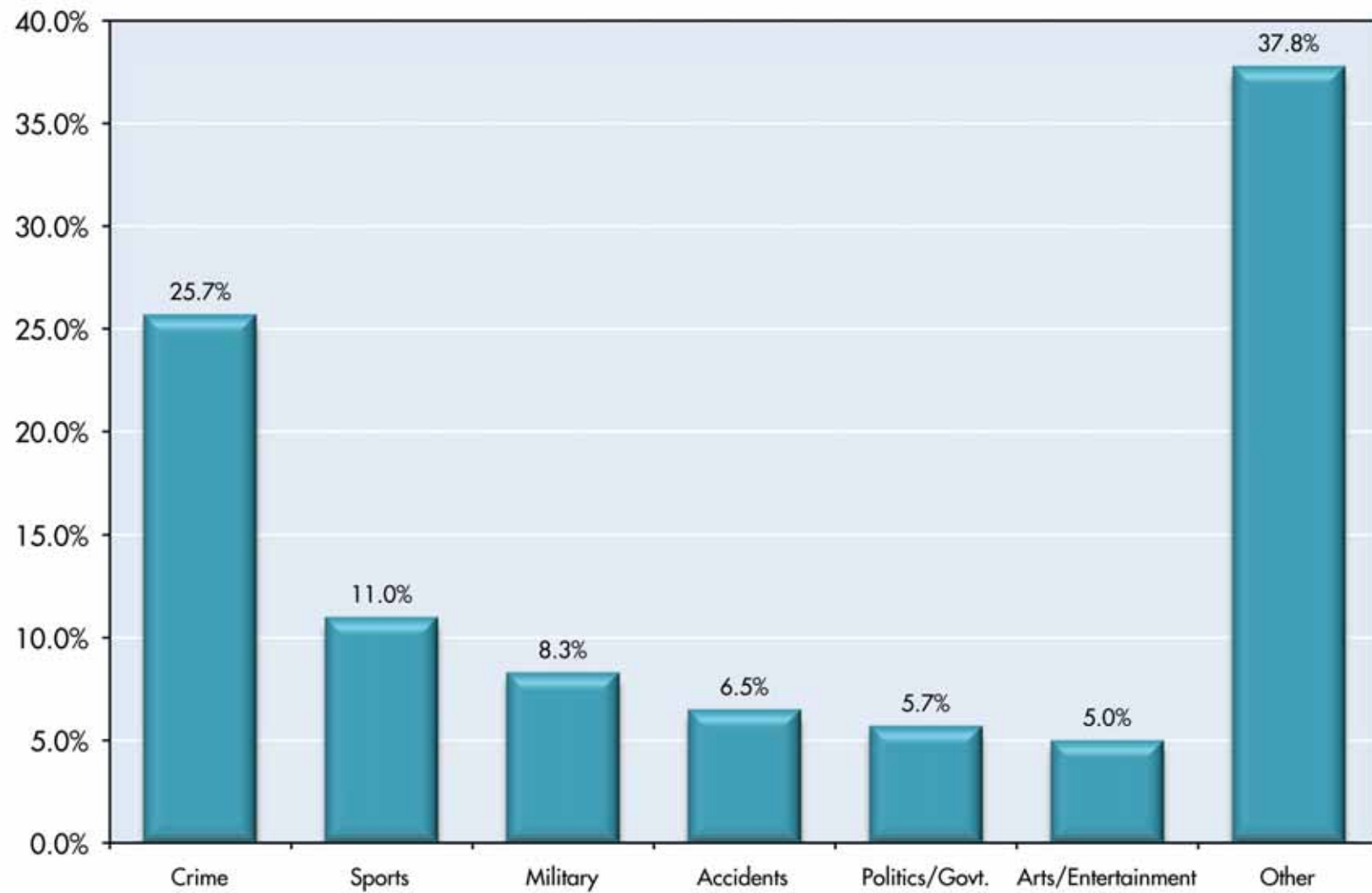
Question No. 2: What types of stories lead the local newscasts?

Crime formed the basis of 25.7 percent of local television news stories (see Graph 1). Violent crime accounted for 11 percent of all news stories, with robbery and murder being reported most often (see Graph 2). Rape, assault, arson and other violent crimes were also mentioned, but not nearly as often as the first two categories.

We found that almost 13.3 percent of the lead stories dealt with some sort of violent crime. Further, when we examined all the lead stories that dealt with any type of crime (both violent and nonviolent), we found that they constituted the lead story in more than 33.3 percent of all newscasts. Overall we found that one in four of all stories related to crime; however, one in three of all lead stories related to crime. Note in Graph 3 how the first five news stories are dominated by general crime and violent crime. The data reveal that when violent crime stories are broadcast in television news, 93 percent of the time they are reported within the first five news stories. When general crime stories are broadcast in television news, they are reported 95 percent of the time within the first five news stories. In contrast, white-collar crimes are only broadcast within the first five news stories about 13 percent of the time. Thus, excluding white-collar crime, violent crime and nonviolent crime are given equal importance in terms of their placement in television news programs.

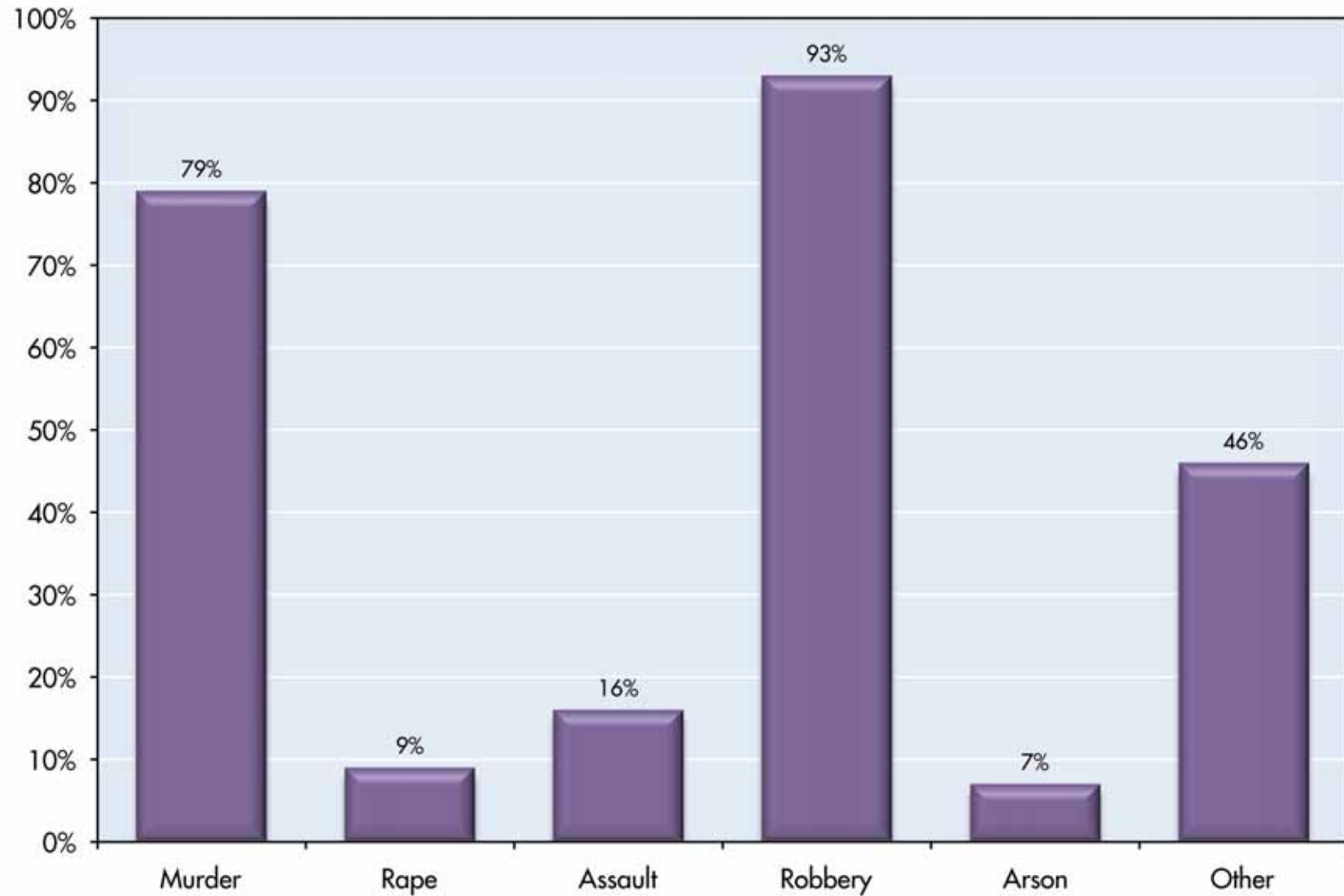


GRAPH 1
TYPES OF LOCAL EVENING NEWS STORIES

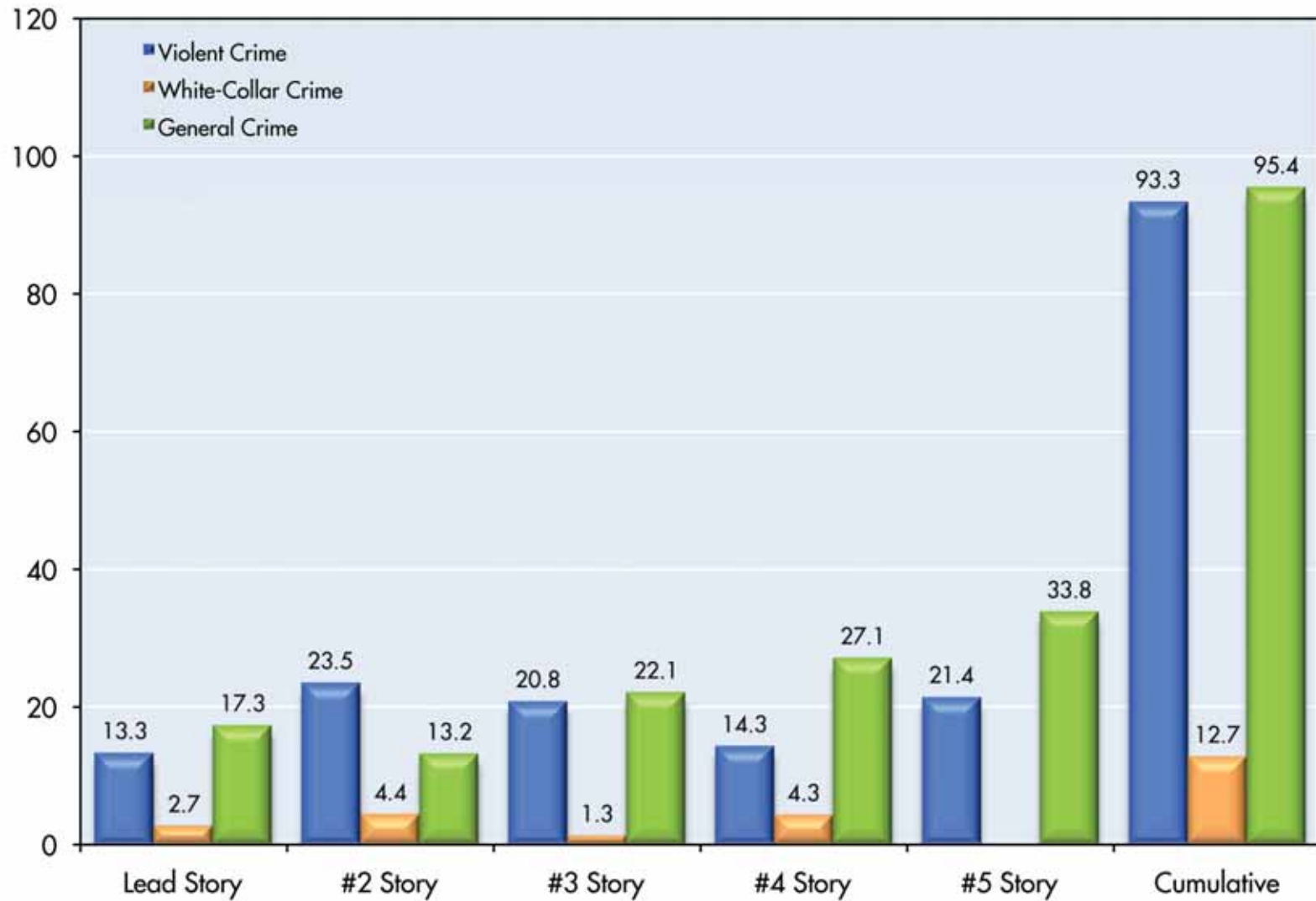


GRAPH 2

TYPES OF VIOLENT CRIME DEPICTED IN TELEVISION NEWS STORIES



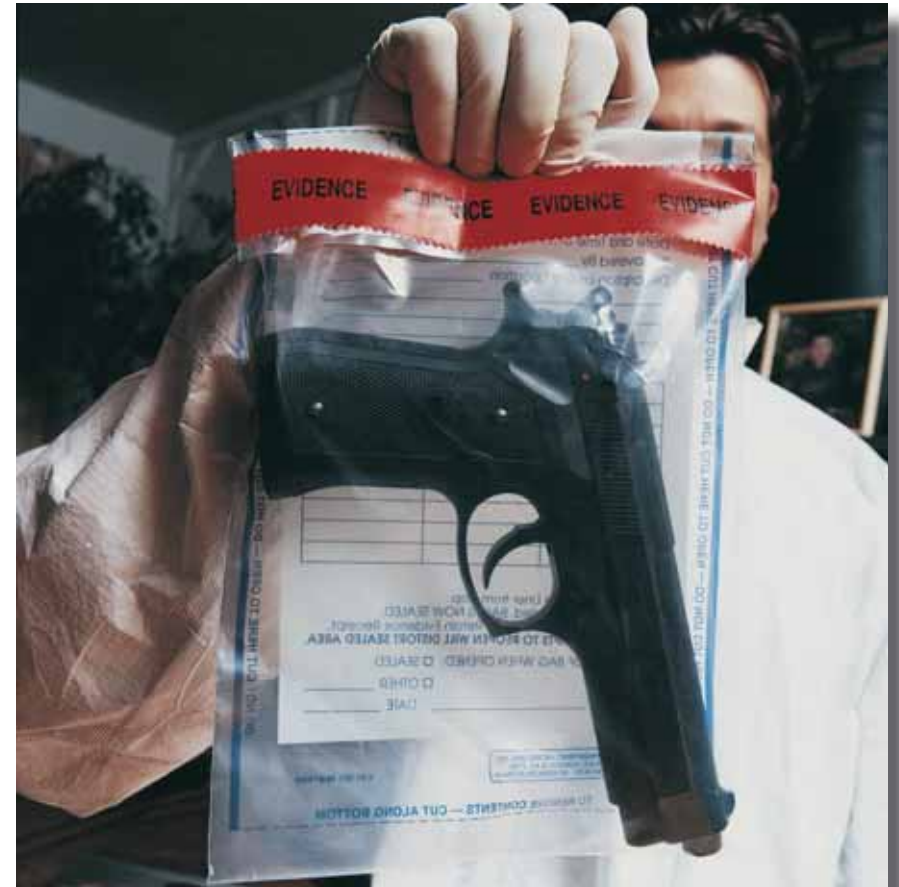
GRAPH 3
PLACEMENT OF CRIME STORIES IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS



Question No. 3: How are minorities portrayed in local television news?

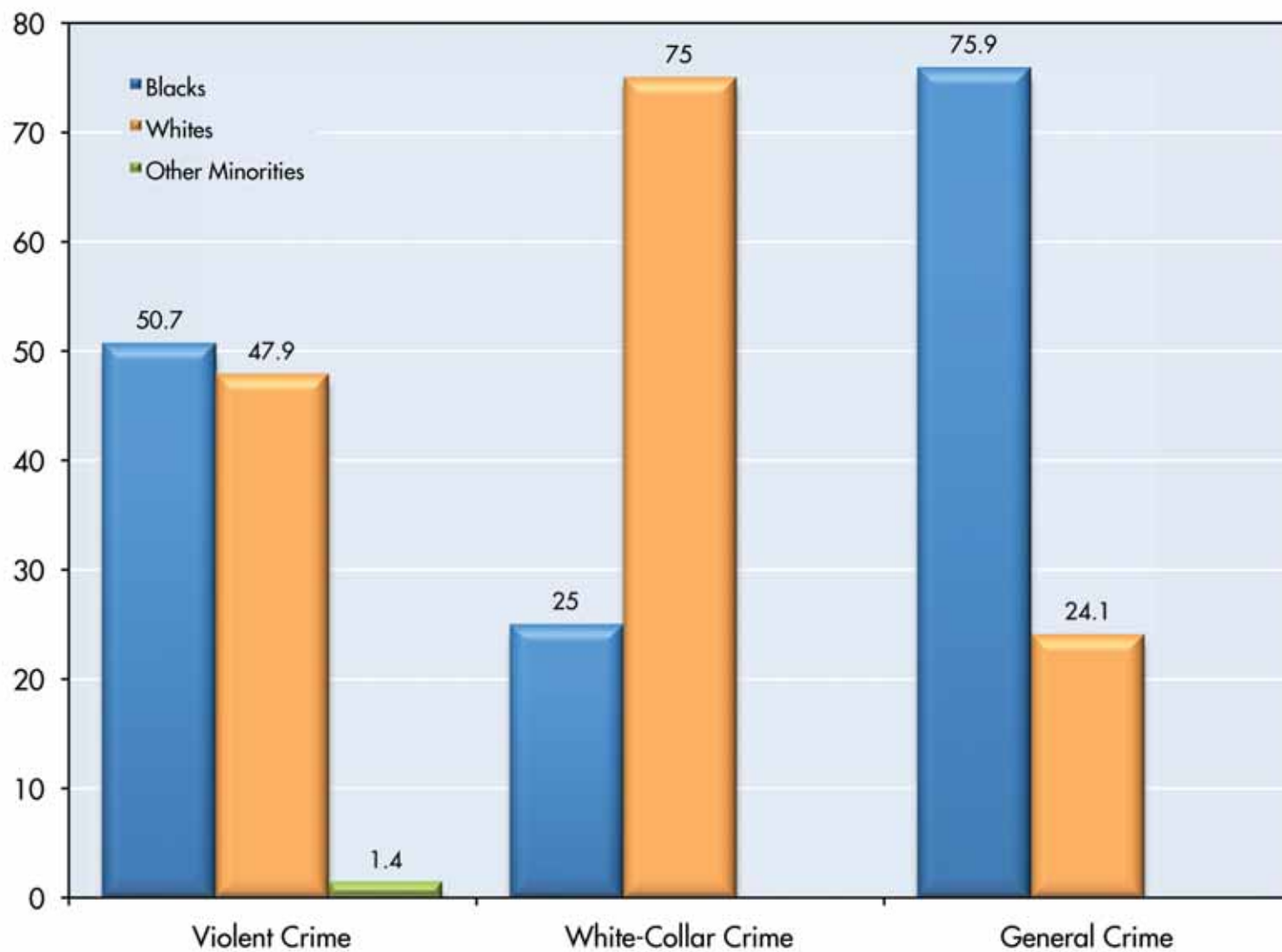
The third major objective of this study is to report how the ethnicity of the perpetrators of crime and victims of crime is portrayed in television news stories. We can see in Graph 4 that blacks¹ are most likely to be the perpetrator of a crime in the local television news stories. This is especially true when reporting on perpetrators of general crime, where black perpetrators outnumber white perpetrators by more than two to one. The one exception to this trend of identifying blacks as the perpetrator is in the area of white-collar crime, where whites are usually reported as the perpetrator.

However, when it comes to reporting on the victims of crime in the local news (Graph 5), blacks are noticeably absent from many of the crime stories and whites are typically found to be the victim. In fact, whites are about four times as likely to be reported as the victim of crime (both violent crime and other crime) as blacks. Thus, when crime news stories are reported, they involve blacks far more often than whites, or than any other non-black minorities, except when the victims of the crimes are identified. Then, whites predominate.

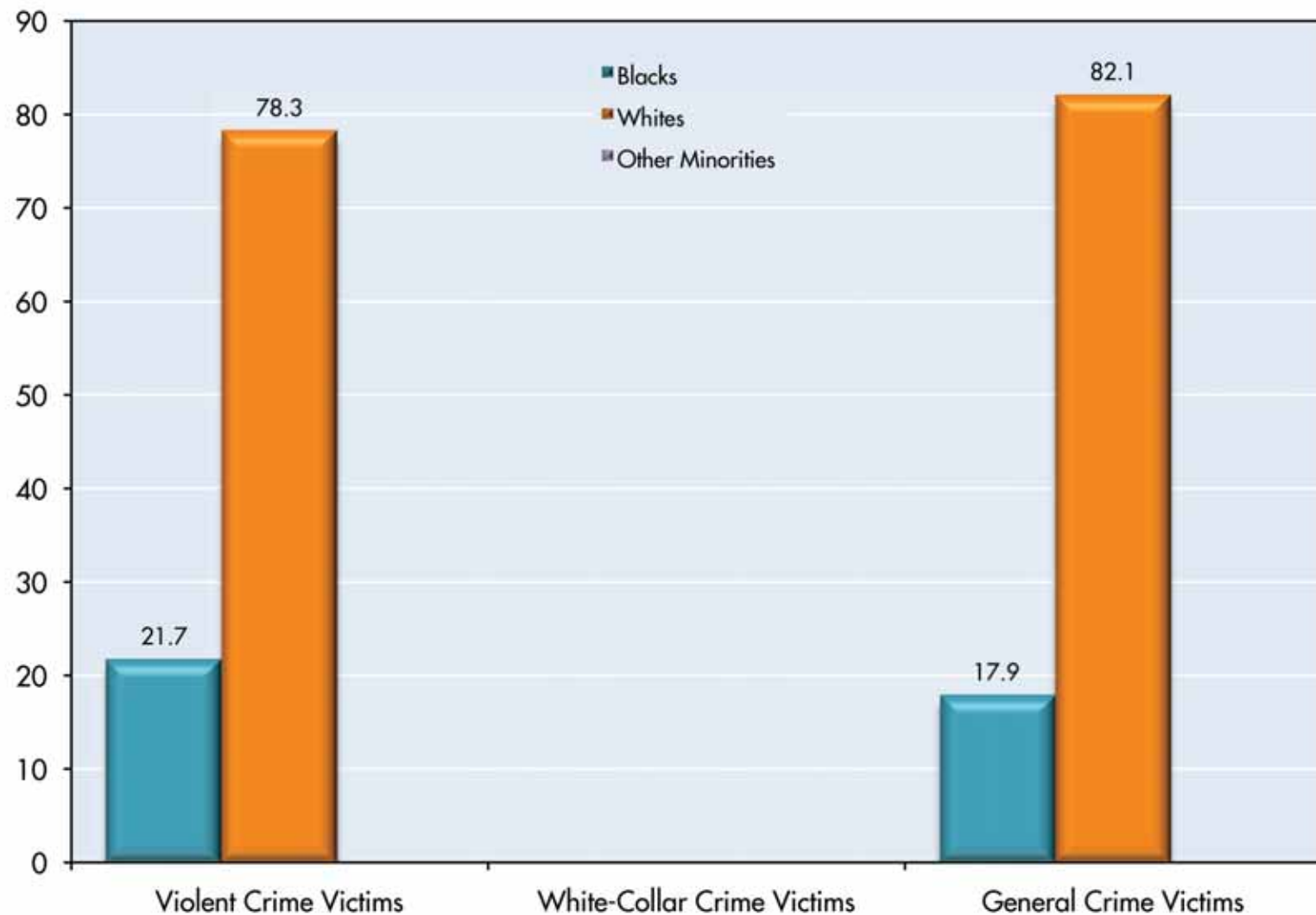


¹ "Black" here is inclusive of African Americans and other apparently black individuals. We make no claim to be able to identify flawlessly the race of all individuals who are highlighted on local evening newscasts. Therefore, our percentages should be regarded as estimates, albeit ones with sufficient precision to be worthy of attention.

GRAPH 4
ETHNICITY OF CRIME PERPETRATORS IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS



GRAPH 5
ETHNICITY OF CRIME VICTIMS IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS



Comparing The Stations In Terms Of Their Crime Portrayals

In this last section of our study we show comparisons of crime reporting by television news programs in Hampton Roads. As can be seen in Table 2, the NBC affiliate WAVY reported the greatest number of crime stories, followed closely by WVBT, the Fox affiliate. WVBT reported the greatest amount of violent crime. This finding is understandable, given that the Fox news team has available an additional four hours of news gathering than the other stations, since Fox does not have an early evening news program, and many violent crimes are committed in the evening hours. WAVY reported the largest number of stories of other crime among the four stations.

TABLE 2				
COVERAGE OF CRIME IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS: COMPARING THE STATIONS				
Crime Shown	WTKR (CBS)	WAVY (NBC)	WVEC (ABC)	WVBT (Fox)
Violent Crime	11.5	10.3	7.9	13.6
White-Collar	0.7	2.2	0.8	2.2
Other Crime	9.1	19.5	9.1	14.6
Total Crime	21.3	32.0	17.8	30.4

It is also interesting to note that WAVY and WVBT both reported significantly more white-collar crime stories (2.2 percent of all stories) than did WTKR (CBS) and WVEC (ABC). Given that white-collar crime is seldom reported on television news, since it rarely makes for dramatic television, this finding is important. For a more visual rendering of these numbers, see Graph 6. Overall, these findings confirm that crime is well covered by the four major network television stations in Hampton Roads, especially by WAVY and WVBT.

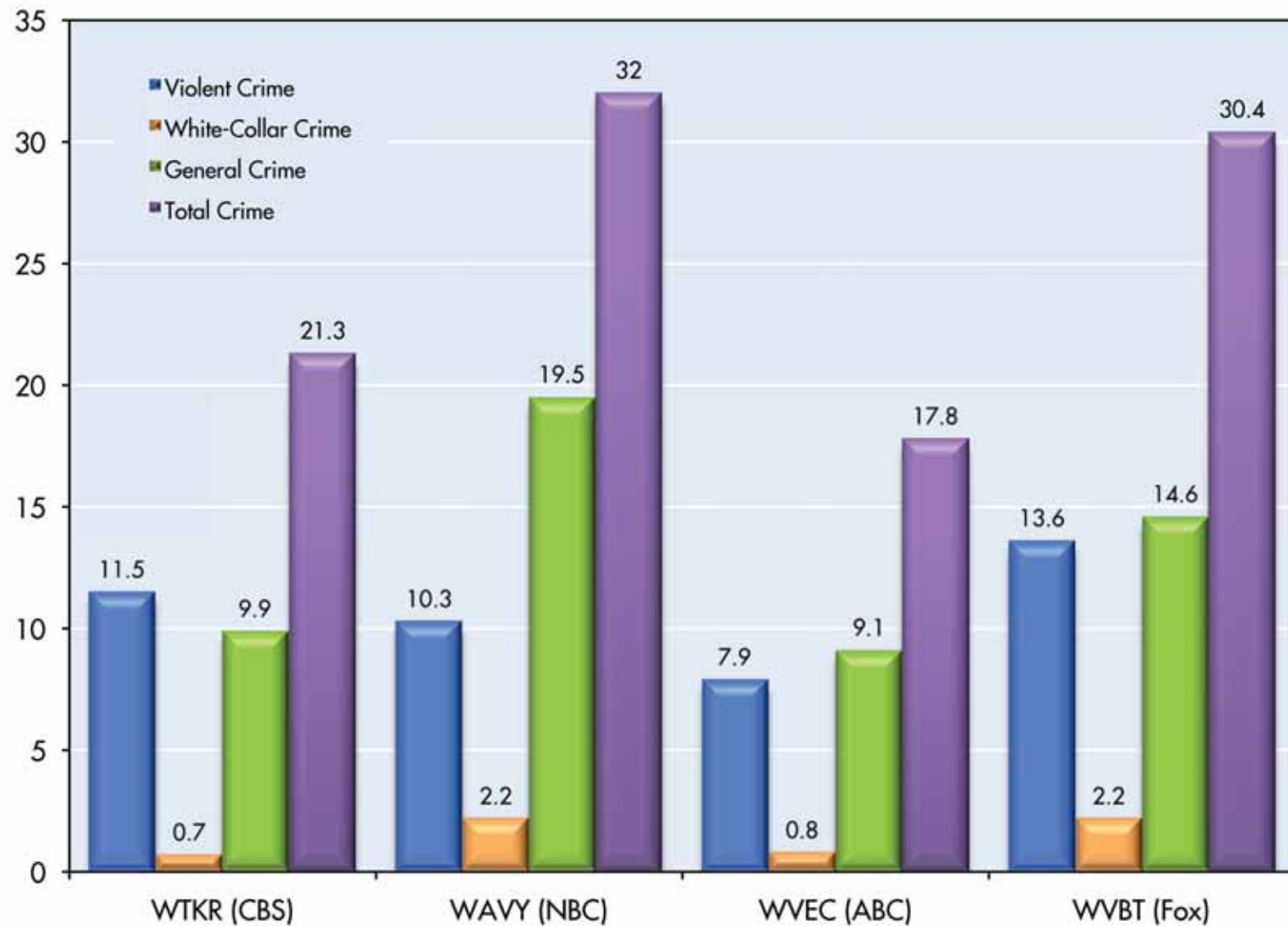
In the next comparison we examined how each of the four local television news affiliates depicted the victims of violent crime, finding some significant differences, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3				
VICTIMS OF VIOLENT CRIME DEPICTED IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS				
Ethnicity Shown	WTKR (CBS)	WAVY (NBC)	WVEC (ABC)	WVBT (Fox)
Black	0.0	18.2	12.5	43.8
White	100.0	81.8	87.5	56.2
Other Minority	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0



GRAPH 6

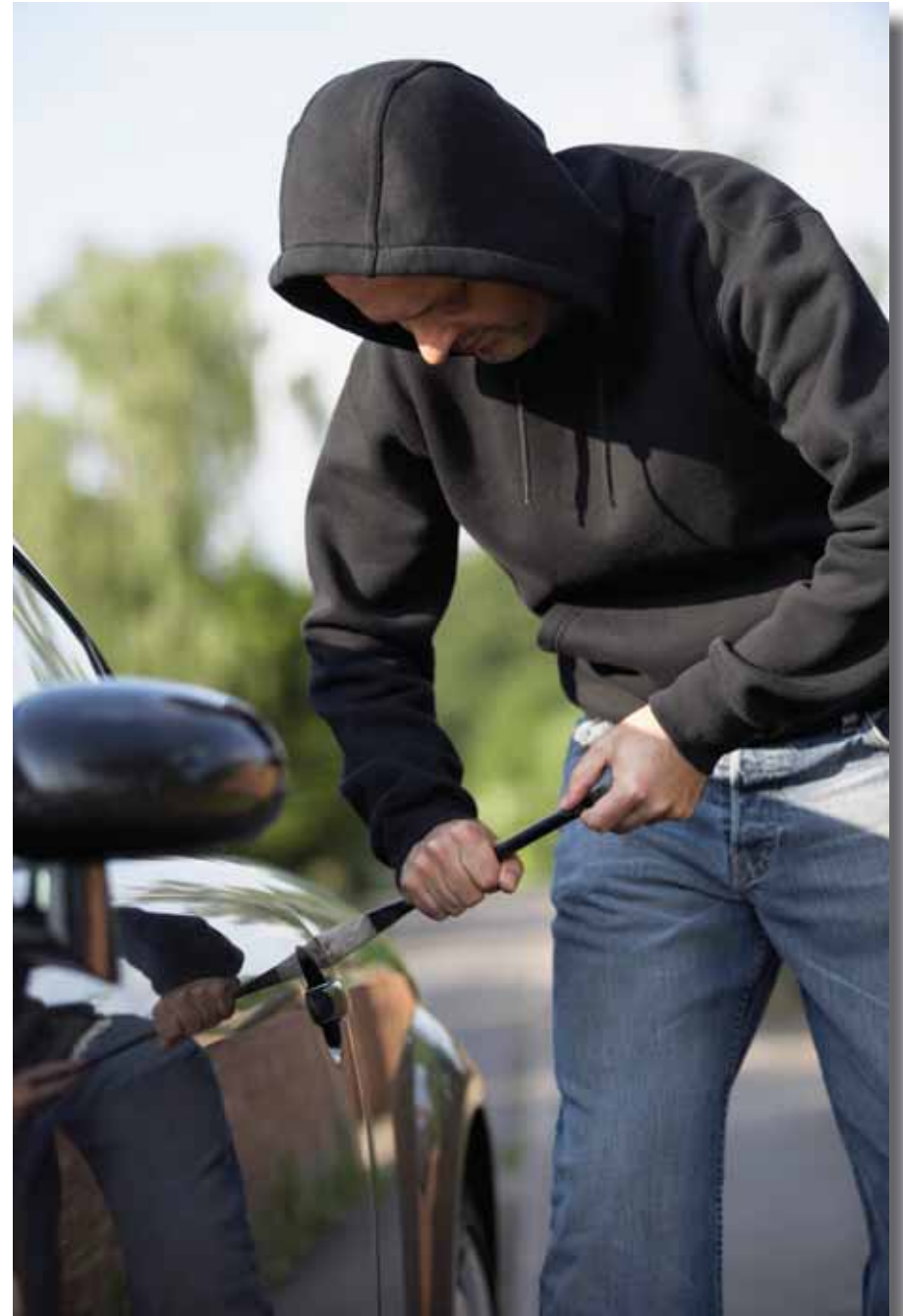
COVERAGE OF CRIME IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS: COMPARING THE STATIONS



WVBT (Fox) stories identified the ethnicity of the victims of violent crime as black 43.8 percent of the time, while its competitors depicted blacks as victims in fewer stories: WAVY (NBC), 18.2 percent; WVEC (ABC), 12.5 percent; and WTKR (CBS), 0.0 percent. For three of the local affiliates, whites were depicted as the victim an overwhelming majority of the time. WVBT was the exception, with whites depicted as the victim 56.2 percent of the time (Graph 7). Thus, the Fox affiliate was much more balanced in its reporting on the victims of violent crime.

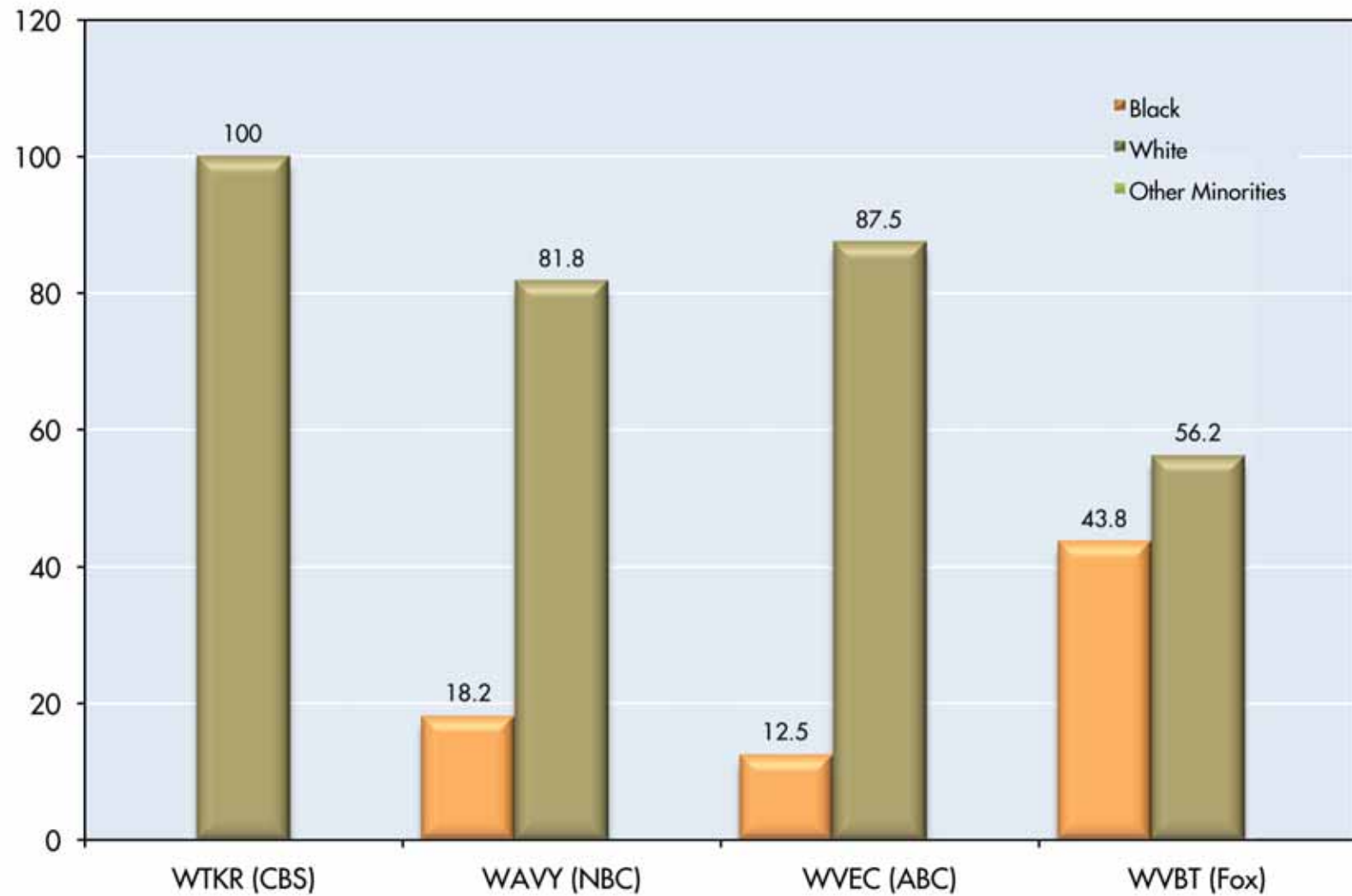
In comparing crime stories depicted in local television news in September 2007 with our latest study of January 2011 (Table 4), we find that news programs reported less violent crime in 2011 than was reported in the 2007 study. In contrast, white-collar crime and general crime stories increased substantially during this period, while overall crime reporting remained about the same, accounting for an average of one-fourth of all news stories. These results are also presented in Graph 8.

TABLE 4 CRIME STORIES DEPICTED IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS: 2007 VERSUS 2011				
Year of Study	Violent Crime	White-Collar Crime	Other Crime	All Crime Stories
2007 Study	16.2	0.2	7.9	24.3
2011 Study	11.0	1.5	13.2	25.7
Average	13.6	0.9	10.6	25.0



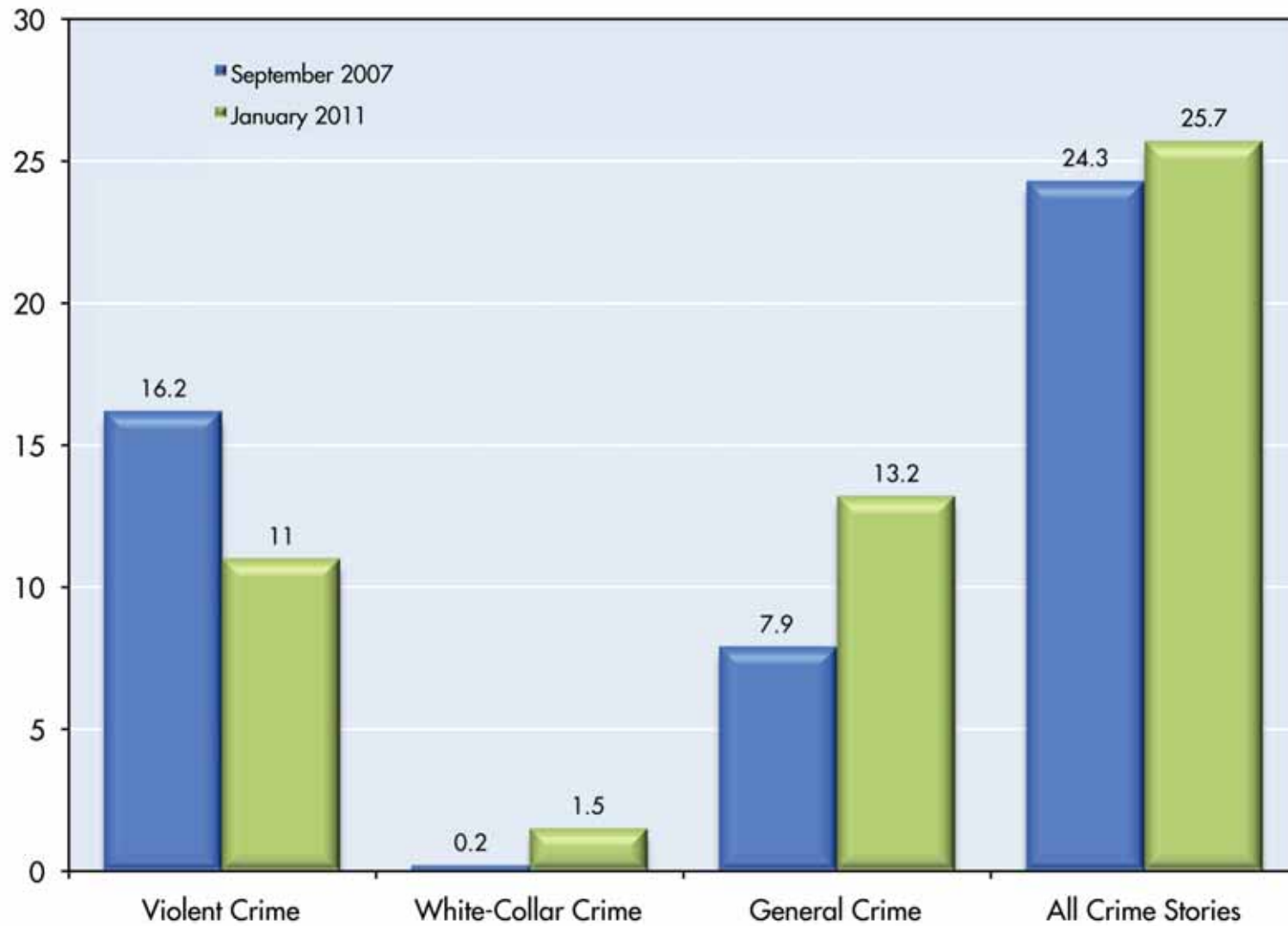
GRAPH 7

**VICTIMS OF VIOLENT CRIME DEPICTED IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS
HAS LOCAL TELEVISION CRIME COVERAGE CHANGED SINCE 2007?**



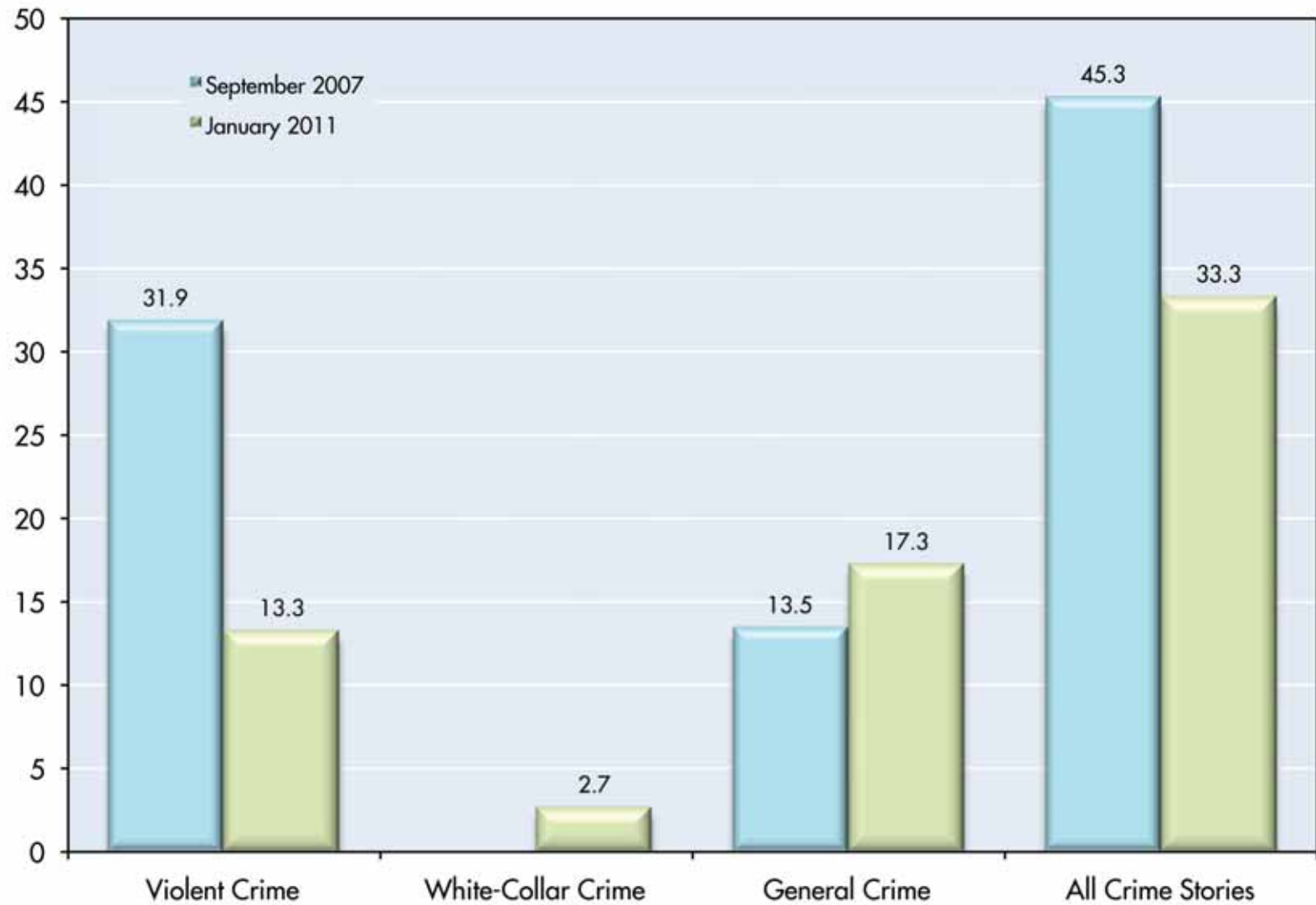
GRAPH 8

CRIME STORIES DEPICTED IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS: 2007 VERSUS 2011



GRAPH 9

**FREQUENCY COMPARISON OF CRIME AS THE LEAD STORIES DEPICTED IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS,
2007 AND 2011 COMMENTARY**



When comparing the lead stories depicted in the local television news from September 2007 with the stories we analyzed from January 2011 (Table 5), we find a significant difference in the reporting of violent crime. The 2011 study found violent crime lead stories were used less than half as much as they were in the 2007 study. Although other crime stories are up slightly in 2011 over the 2007 study, the overall reporting of violent crime as lead stories on television news is down, as illustrated in Graph 9. Also, white-collar crime in 2011 was the lead news story 2.7 percent of the time as compared to none in 2007.

TABLE 5 COMPARISON OF CRIME AS THE LEAD STORIES DEPICTED IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS, 2007 AND 2011				
Year of Study	Violent Crime	White-Collar Crime	Other Crime	All Crime Stories
2007 Study	31.9	0	13.5	45.3
2011 Study	13.3	2.7	17.3	33.3
Average	22.6	1.4	15.4	39.3

Local television news stations accept the challenge and responsibility to represent a community to itself. They not only scan and seek out events, concerns and interests of the communities, but also select, marshal and present their findings in ways they deem both important and relevant to their viewers. Nevertheless, these viewers are citizens who filter the news from the particular vantage point of the news reporters, editors and producers.

Coverage in local newspapers (The Virginian-Pilot and the Daily Press) during the comparable period focused on charges against officers of the USS Enterprise for improper oversight of raunchy videos and against a local state delegate for alleged bribery in relation to Old Dominion University. Other dominant issues ranged from the impending closure of JFCOM, the horrific shooting rampage in Arizona and President Obama’s State of the Union address, to state funding for roads and the democratic demonstrations and chaos in Egypt. Locally, The Pilot focused on day care negligence, light rail debates, the rape of several female sailors and the death of a police recruit. There was also remarkable coverage

of community events for the homeless and environmental cleanup efforts (as well as reports on some minor tussling by school boards and city councils). The Hampton Roads section also ran headlines about bank and liquor store robberies, school board firings, the future of Waterside and foreclosures, and featured the delightfully sassy columns of Kerry Dougherty on such topics as dead fish and dive-bombing birds.

Daily Press coverage during the same period paralleled that of The Pilot, with stories ranging from the indictment of Peninsula Delegate Phil Hamilton to the chaos in Cairo (although the Daily Press seemed to focus more on personal stories, such as reporting on the plight of local Hampton Roads tourists stuck in Egypt). More human-interest items (brain tumor patients and leaders of shipbuilding firms) appeared on the front pages of the Daily Press. Various white-collar crimes and local crime briefs were also featured, such as black-market cigarette stings and targeting career criminals. Interestingly, several articles showcased how police were being trained to respond to mental health crises and other local concerns, illuminating positive community-building steps in the news.

Significantly, Hampton Roads television news programs showcased reports on crime less than their national counterparts. Only one-fourth of the time did violent crimes lead the national nightly news. This represented a significant statistical difference from our previous study – quite astonishing, actually, in the reduction of such criminal reportage as the lead story. In summary, both studies reveal that about one out of every four stories reported in Hampton Roads television news programs is about crime. However, both studies also reveal that crime news reporting has decreased as the lead news story, dropping from 45.3 percent in September 2007 to 33.3 percent in January 2011.

While the common practice of leading television evening news with violent crime stories (“If it bleeds, it leads”) was still evident in local broadcasting practices, it was down 50 percent from the 2007 levels. The number of white-collar crime stories increased in our study, suggesting that more attention has been paid to this trend or that violent crime has actually decreased. The alleged bribery by Delegate Hamilton, the rise of meth activity, the improper refrigeration of restaurant meats

and charges regarding a taxpayer-funded Norfolk Community Services Board employee in a “no show” case were reported alongside stories of robberies and sexual assaults. Yet, while the number of all crime stories increased, the presentation of violent crime was down.

Reportage on African American victims and perpetrators tended to emphasize the latter, identifying black lawbreakers, but not the injured parties. By not reporting the ethnicity of violent crime victims, which statistically is higher for minorities, one may easily misperceive the identity of the victims. For many years and over many studies, there has been a clear difference in how blacks and whites are reported in relation to crime. Blacks are perceived to be overrepresented as the perpetrator of crimes and whites are more often seen as the victim. Our study finds that this is still the case with news stories being reported in Hampton Roads.

When examining the stories of victims of violent crime depicted in local television news, a clear trend emerged. The victims of violent crime were identified more often as white than black. However, there were some significant differences between how the stations reported these stories. All of the victims of violent crime whose ethnicity was identified on WTKR (CBS) were white; however, only 56.2 percent of the victims were identified as white on WVBT (Fox). Both WAVY (NBC) and WVEC (ABC) news stories identified the victims as white more than 80 percent of the time.

To reiterate, our comparison of Hampton Roads news stories from September 2007 to January 2011 revealed that violent crime reporting significantly decreased from 16.2 percent to 11 percent. Several factors could contribute to this finding. For example, it may be that violent crime is not as prevalent now as it was 3½ years ago, but it is also possible that news organizations are more aware of the negative consequences in reporting too much violent news and are more careful and balanced in how they report this kind of story. Nevertheless, when violent crime is reported on our local news programs it is among the top five news stories 93 percent of the time. Regardless of the cause, there is a noticeable positive change in violent crime reporting.

When examining lead stories in local television news in 2007 and 2011, it is clear that there is a substantive drop in the reporting of crime stories. In 2007, we found that 45.3 percent of all lead stories on local television news were crime stories; but this year, we discovered that only one-third of the lead stories were about crime. Again, several factors could account for this change, including the time of year we collected the data, a change in the number of crimes committed or the intentional efforts by news reporters and editors to provide more balanced reporting.

News content is changing as communities embrace new technologies, but the local evening news is still an important part of the social fabric of the world we inhabit. How this world is reported influences our understanding, affects our emotions and contributes to our feelings of anger, fear, ethnic bias and disgust, as well as our sense of joy, peace, racial harmony and safety. In short, the news affects how we behave toward one another and the choices we make in living out our lives.

If we are continually fed a diet of crime and fear, then we may be negatively affected by these images. They may instill in us seeds of suspicion and mistrust of our fellow man. It is clear that the news media can create a fear of visiting cities, living in urban areas and an irrational concern about being a victim of random violence. As responsible citizens we must help others to understand how the news is framed and how this influences our perceptions of the world.